

March 2024

# Bird Notes

## Newsletter of the Grand Traverse Audubon Club

[grandtraverseaudubon.org](http://grandtraverseaudubon.org)

find us on Facebook and Instagram #gtaudubon

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Red-wings and grackles already? This certainly is a strange year. Be ready for the parade of spring migrants to show up early!

## On the Calendar

Our meetings are usually on the fourth Thursday of the month at the Boardman River Nature Center on Cass Road at 7:00 pm. Everyone is welcome to attend!

### March 21, 2024 – Monthly Meeting: Waterfowl Identification with Scott Sneed

Scott will help us sort through identification of ducks, geese, and swans, plus some loons and grebes. Polish your skills just in time for spring waterfowl migration!

### April 18, 2024 – Monthly Meeting: Nature Observation and Sketching

Penny Krebiehl, local artist will talk about drawing techniques for 15-20 minutes, then we'll all take our sketchbooks outside and sketch stuff. Penny will offer helpful suggestions as we work. Bring a notebook or sketchbook, a pencil, and an eraser to the meeting.

Note: we don't meet in May because we're all too busy birding!



*Official GTA club logo by Tom Ford*

## Upcoming Field Trips

### March 23

Waterfowl Identification

### April 7

Sunday Bird Walks begin

### April 12

Sky dance of the Woodcock

### April 27

Arcadia Marsh Trip

## Upcoming Field Trips

### March 23 (Saturday): Spring Waterfowl

Right after Scott Sneed's program, we're offering a chance to practice your waterfowl ID and build your skills. Meet Kirk Waterstripe at Medalie Park (Logan's Landing) at 8:30 am.

### April 12 (Friday) – Sky dance of the American Woodcock

It's that time again! Join us to witness the courtship flight of the American Woodcock! Meet at 7:00 pm at the YMCA on Silver Lake Road, Traverse City to see (or listen to) this little shorebird take to the skies to impress a mate.

### April 27 (Saturday): Birding at Arcadia Marsh

Come along on this annual favorite trip to a fantastic marsh. We'll look for Sandhill Cranes, waterfowl, blackbirds, early warblers, and much more. Parts of this trip will be accessible to those with mobility issues. Watch your BirdAlert emails for more details.

### April 7, 2024 (Sunday)– Sunday Morning Bird Outings start!

Every Sunday from now through June, Kirk Waterstripe will lead a group at a location around Traverse City. If you're a beginning birder, or if you want to polish your skills, these trips are for you! Like last year, on the last Sunday of each month, the walk will take place in the evening.

Locations and times are listed on the Events tab on the club website, and they'll be announced each week on BirdAlert.



For our complete schedule, click the Events 2024 tab at [grandtraverseaudubon.org](http://grandtraverseaudubon.org). Check back for updates and additional trips in the fall.

Note! If you would like a ride to any of our events, just "reply all" to the email announcement. One of the other members planning to attend might be able to offer a ride.

## Birding Calendar

### March

Chickadees, titmice and cardinals are singing. Woodpeckers are starting to drum. Red-winged Blackbirds and grackles are returning due to the incredibly mild winter. Expect some migrants to be ahead of schedule.

### April

Sandhill Cranes, woodcock, swallows, meadowlarks, kinglets, and other blackbirds will be arriving. The finches that stopped by briefly in the winter will be passing through again on their way north.

### May

This month, we look forward to warblers. Late winter storms may affect the usual migration schedule. Hopefully, things will settle down by the time the thrushes and flycatchers arrive.

## Help promote birds and the Club

This year, we're expanding our outreach and community presence. We'll have a table at two events this spring, and we need volunteers to meet people and talk birds!

April 20 – TADL's Makerfest at the Civic Center in Traverse City

June 8 – NatureFest by Green Elk Rapids, for more info visit <https://www.greenelkrapids.org/nature-fest.html>

## Events in our region

If you'd like to get out of town, here are a few events put on by organizations around our region:

**Mackinac Straits Raptor Watch** is hosting three weekends with high probabilities of seeing certain raptor species:

March 16 & 17 – Golden Eagles

April 13 & 14 – Red-tailed Hawk (come master the ID of this common but highly variable raptor)

April 27 & 28 – Broad-winged Hawk

**Free Bluebird Nest Box Workshop**, Saturday April 13 at the Boardman Nature Center 10:00 – 12:00

An A-Z program explaining all the steps of putting up and monitoring bluebird nest boxes. Bluebird experts from the Michigan Bluebird Society will be on hand to answer all your questions. Nest boxes, poles, accessories will be for sale. Walk out with everything you need to get started attracting bluebirds. Informational handouts including easy-to-build nest box plans will be available too.



Les Cheneaux welcomes you to celebrate the legacy of Aldo Leopold — one of America's most influential naturalists — during **our festival, May 29th – June 2nd, 2024**. Activities include paddling excursions, orchid and wildflower tours, birding trips, presentations, and many other nature-based activities. Experience the woods and water that formed Leopold's early impressions of the natural world as we honor the mark he made on conservation and the environment. (From their website; more info and registration at <https://www.aldoleopoldfestival.org/>)

## Editor's Perch

### Smart binoculars?

You may have heard about the new smart binoculars that have hit the market. A manufacturer of very good binoculars is offering a model that identifies up to 9000 species of birds for you, for the low, low price of \$4800. So, maybe put it on your holiday list?

There are technical questions: how well has the AI been trained? How good is it really? The binocular is an 8x32, so I suspect it will fall short of expectations in low light conditions, like deep under the canopy in tropical forests, or late in the evening when shorebirds are coming in to roost on an island you somehow scored access to. And I can't wait to hear how it performs on pelagic trips, with all the pitching and tossing.

My first reaction was more philosophical: no. Just no. I grew up paging through the Peterson field guide before bed, training myself to associated images and names. In the field, the names came easily after a short time. I grew up to be an old-school birder, taught by time in the field and the helpful guidance of others. I found tremendous satisfaction in the process of puzzling out the identity of new species, in recognizing the key field marks that make a bird unique. I find that to be a big part of the fun of birding.

After thinking about this new technology, I've softened. A little. With Merlin and eBird and photos of all the birds of the world at our fingertips, perhaps we're less likely to carry a field guide. Still, new birders are faced with the task of learning what to look for to identify a bird. They have to learn to estimate size, note features of its shape (long legs, chunky body, long bill, a crest, a hooked bill, and lots more). This leads to putting the bird in a family (hawks, ducks, woodpeckers, finches, warblers, etc.). From there, they have to notice wing bars, eye rings, and nuances of shape. Then there are all the behavioral differences. That's a lot to take in when you're just starting out!

In the end, how is a computer telling you "That's an Eastern Bluebird" any different from a mentor saying the same thing? There's the lack of human interaction, of course. The key to progressing is to ask what combination of characteristics and behaviors make that bird an Eastern Bluebird. Once you start doing that, you're on your way to a wider world of satisfaction in bird identification, and it's much easier to ask a human than your binoculars.

So, here's my review of the concept of AI binoculars, and I guess it applies to AI for song identification too (Merlin): it could be very helpful for some in the beginning, but don't come to rely on it. Lean on it at first, but wean yourself from it later. You'll find more satisfaction in identifying birds on your own. I'll be out there with my not-smart 8x42s, and feel free to ask if you need help!

- Kirk W.

## Executive Board News

Your Board has been busy! In addition to scheduling events for the spring, President John Imboden has encouraged us to think about what direction we (including you) would like to take the club. Recently, you received a link to a survey asking whether you think the club should pursue non-profit status, and how we should prioritize our efforts in education, conservation, and social activities. Thanks to those who have completed the survey so far!

As part of this effort, we've been considering our values and our overall mission. These discussions will result in some changes to our by-laws (current by-laws available [here](#)), which will need to be approved by you, the membership. Watch for your chance to vote!

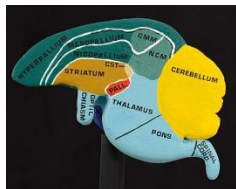
Our goals are to make sure the club continues to exist, and to ensure that our resources are used in ways that align with our values as a club. Members are always welcome at board meetings. If you have concerns, contact the nearest board member!

## New way to access information on regional bird festivals!

Tawas Point Migration - May 17-18, <https://www.michiganfun.com/event/tawas-point-migration/>

Kirtland Warbler Festival – May 31-June 1, <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/event/kirtlands-warbler-festival/>

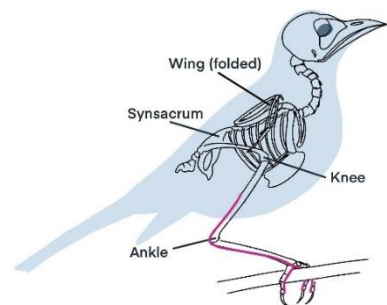
For more info on these and other events, keep an eye on the Community Partners' Events tab on our website! If you know of something that's not listed, contact Kathie at [dujour1@gmail.com](mailto:dujour1@gmail.com).



### Bird Brains

How do perching birds stay on a branch?

Have you ever wondered how birds maintain their grip on a perch while they sleep? Why don't they relax and lose their grip? The early anatomy studies found that birds have a tendon that tightens as they flex their ankles (see illustration) so when they snuggle down to roost, their toes curl and don't let go. There is even a ratchet-like locking mechanism.



### Be-a-Better-Birder Tip

Learn to sketch birds in the field. This will help train your eye to capture details. For help getting started, come to the April meeting!

Like all things, there may be more to it. Birds that perch have an organ of equilibrium in their synsacrum (again, see the picture) that connects to the nervous system, and may help the bird stay balanced. Thus, they can stay on a perch without thinking about it.

(Image from <https://www.juneauempire.com/news/on-the-trails-why-dont-birds-fall-off-their-perches/>)

## Bird-a-thon 2024!

Let's combine two things that are a lot of fun and important to us: birding and raising funds for a good cause!

Who? – You, alone or with a few friends

When? – one 24-hour period between May 11 and May 25, 2024

Where? – somewhere in our region (pick 1-2 counties)

How? - collect pledges from individuals and local businesses, go birding, collect the funds based on how many species you saw, pass them on to the Audubon Club treasurer, who will make the donations.

Why? – to raise money for a donation to

- Michigan DNR [Nongame Fish and Wildlife Trust Fund](#)
- [MI Audubon Young Birders Camp](#)
- Our own Walter Hastings Fund for Conservation

For a registration form and pledge sheet, contact Kirk at [4walkinglightly@gmail.com](mailto:4walkinglightly@gmail.com).

One team is forming already! There might be a quirky prize for the winning team!

## Reader Submissions



Bald Eagle and Bohemian Waxwings by Jenny Young



Cooper's Hawk by Lauren Vaughn



Red-footed Booby by Carrie Olmstead

Thanks to all those who sent photos!

## ID Corner: Purple Finch vs. House Finch

These two species are a challenging pair to identify, especially for newer birders. Here are some key differences:

Both sexes – House Finches have longer tails and a lower forehead. Purple Finches' head feathers are more raised, giving them a "poofy" effect.

Males – On a House Finch, the red color is confined to the head, breast, and the top of the rump. It ranges from brick red, to bright red and even orange, depending on nutritional status. Male Purple Finches are a pinkish red, or "raspberry" color that makes up a general wash over the head, breast, and an undertone on the feathers of the back. (Believe it or not, this is what we called purple back when Purple Finches were named.)

Females – Purple Finch females have a bold white stripe above the eye, and a brown stripe through the eye. The brown stripes on the breast are more sharply defined than the stripes on a female House Finch. These appear more like smudges. The facial markings are also less defined.

Voices – both species' songs are long and rambling, with no repeated phrases. Purple Finch songs are clearer, almost a whistle, while House Finch songs are more raspy or buzzy, often with one slurred buzzy phrase mixed in.



Scott Sneed



Kirk Waterstripe

## Challenge Yourself (or a friend)!

You're a pretty experienced birder, but you want to take it up another level. Have you tried putting yourself in the right place and time for a particular target species? Not a chase, but one you think should be there, but you're not sure. For a fun extension of the game aspect of birding, pick a bird, or have a friend pick one, and pick a place, like a county, and try to find that bird. When pursuing a challenge, consider habitat and time of year.

Here's a list to get you started:

### Beginner level

Ruffed Grouse  
Winter Wren  
Virginia Rail  
Veery  
Eastern Screech-Owl  
Eastern Towhee  
Wilson's Snipe  
American Bittern  
Golden-crowned Kinglet  
Vesper Sparrow  
Scarlet Tanager  
Alder Flycatcher  
Horned Lark

### More advanced level

Canada Warbler  
Bank Swallow  
Upland Sandpiper

Blackburnian Warbler  
Common Tern  
Clay-colored Sparrow  
Sedge Wren  
Marsh Wren  
Least Bittern  
Field Sparrow  
Bonaparte's Gull  
Willow Flycatcher  
Wood Thrush  
Olive-sided Flycatcher  
Lincoln's Sparrow  
Northern Saw-whet Owl  
Prairie Warbler  
Mourning Warbler

### Expert level

Connecticut Warbler  
Whimbrel



(advanced cont'd)  
Louisiana Waterthrush  
Lark Sparrow  
White-rumped Sandpiper  
Peregrine Falcon

To get things started, I challenge the beginners to find a Golden-crowned Kinglet in March, and I challenge the advanced birders to find a Northern Saw-whet Owl. Let's keep both challenges to Grand Traverse County.

## Citizen Science – a rare opportunity!

The Ranger on Power Island has inquired about getting our help to do a bird survey of the island this year! We're planning for **June 1<sup>st</sup>**, so *mark your calendars!* He's going to reserve the campsite (room for two tents) for the night before so some folks can get an early start. Boat transport to the island and other details be announced in the May issue of *Bird Notes*, and on BirdAlert. Save the date!

***Thanks for reading! Until the next issue, keep your binoculars clean!***